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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE IMMEDIATE 0639
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000953

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FOR EUR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC; DRL A/S LOWENKRON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/27/2017

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ALIYEV: ON JAILED JOURNALISTS, "I WANT THEM OUT, IT IS A QUESTION OF UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS"

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a spirited July 27 exchange with President Aliyev, Ambassador Derse laid out the international community's serious concerns on defamation suits, jailed journalists, and the lack of government investigation of violence against journalists. On the jailed journalists, the President said unequivocally that he would not bow to "international pressure" to release them. He clearly implied, however, that he would be more generous if the journalists sought pardons directly. He admitted that having them in prison was bad for the country's image, and said he wants them out, but "the question is under what conditions." He invited USG ideas on how to "get out of this situation."

¶2. (C) Summary Continued: The President noted that he had met with Russian Deputy FM Kislyak on July 26. Kislyak is en route to Washington for Missile Defense talks. He said that Kislyak came to Baku to re-confirm that Azerbaijan is not opposed to U.S.-Russian cooperation on the Qabala radar station. Kislyak also told the President that Iran is very nervous about the Qabala proposal and that the Russians were busy calming them down. In response to the Ambassador's request that Azerbaijan not receive the Iranian President, Aliyev said that the visit, now likely to be at the end of August, could not be postponed indefinitely. Finally, concerning the Azerbaijani interest in a U.S. train and equip (TEP) military program, the President said, "We will do it." He agreed, in principle, to provide more troops and U.S. TEP-trained troops to Coalition operations in Afghanistan. He welcomed the visit of a EUCOM technical team in August to clarify how a TEP would work. End Summary.

On Jailed Journalists, "Let's Resolve This"

¶3. (C) On July 27, the Ambassador called on President Ilham Aliyev to request that Azerbaijan not allow the visit of the Iranian President and to discuss media freedom. Underscoring the importance the USG attaches to progress in this area of our bilateral relations, she highlighted the upcoming round of Human Rights and Democracy Dialogue talks between DRL A/S Barry Lowenkron and the Azerbaijani FM. She presented the international community's concerns about the government's backsliding on media freedom, including the continuing libel suits, imprisonment and beatings of journalists, and failure to investigate and prosecute incidents of violence against journalists. She highlighted the efforts by the U.S. government to train journalists and promote journalistic ethics.

14. (C) The President began with a defensive tone, taking particular note of those who have suggested that pressure on the media is connected with the 2008 elections. "I don't frankly see any rivals from the opposition or from within my own party. Even without mounting a campaign, I would win. It would not be wise for me to pressure the media in this environment," he remarked. "Jailed journalists are not what I wanted to see, but they (those who brought suits against the journalists) acted within the law. And I did not stop them," he continued.

15. (C) The President stressed that one of the key issues now is that the seven journalists have asked the U.S., the OSCE and the Council of Europe to intervene to seek a pardon, but the seven have not asked the President for a pardon. "This is Azerbaijan, this is not Europe. They need to ask me," the President added. When the Ambassador suggested that the seven may not want to act in a way that suggests they accept guilt, the President said that the journalists should "acknowledge their guilt or let them continue to sit." Finally, after the Ambassador repeatedly pressed for continuing to look for a way forward, the President said, "Let's resolve this. I want them out, it is only a question of under what conditions." The Ambassador asked to have a subsequent conversation in which the USG would provide ideas. The President agreed.

16. (C) On democracy more generally, the President repeated his contention that the West uses a double standard when judging the policies of his government. "I have seen my name on the list of 10 worst media predators. In Georgia, there is no opposition. TV channels are bought by oligarchs.

BAKU 00000953 002 OF 003

Opposition leaders in jail. But they are a "democracy." In Ukraine, Yushenko has violated the constitution 60 times and there is only silence from the Council of Europe, EU and U.S.," he bitterly asserted. He said that he expects that in 2008, international observers will come with their criticisms written before they arrive. This, he adds, was our experience in 2003 and 2005. "It's not fair." The Ambassador said that if the 2008 elections meet international standards the USG will recognize that fact. The key is having a clear understanding of what that means. She said the USG would have ideas to offer. The President agreed to discuss them.

MISSILE DEFENSE CONSULTATIONS WITH RUSSIANS LIMITED

17. (C) President Aliyev volunteered that he had met with Russian Deputy FM Sergey Kislyak on July 26 to discuss political-military issues, including the Russian proposal for American-Russian cooperation at the Qabala radar station. Aliyev said that the talks were not extensive and the primary focus of Kislyak's visit was to visit the Gabala station in advance of talks with the U.S. Kislyak sought re-confirmation of Azerbaijan's willingness not to oppose this proposed American-Russian cooperation. "I told him that it's none of our business. They should have their talks with the Americans. If and when we are needed, we will be cooperative," the President recounted that he had told Kislyak. The President said that Kislyak noted that Russia was having problems with Iran. The Iranians were very nervous about the Qabala proposal and needed to be calmed down. The President also noted that the Iranians have not raised the issue with the GOAJ. Aliyev said Kislyak also raised the recurrent Russian proposal to create a Caspian military force (CASFOR). The President said that he told Kislyak that it would be important to understand what such a force would mean in practice. "What would I see from my back window? Russian ships? Iranian ships? We sent this question to the experts-level," he added dismissively.

IRANIAN PRESIDENT SCHEDULED TO COME AT THE END OF AUGUST

18. (C) The Ambassador pressed the President not to allow Iranian President Ahmadinejad to visit Azerbaijan and, were he to visit, to keep the visit low profile and avoid any substantive agreements, particularly on energy cooperation. The President said, after postponing the visit multiple times since the beginning of the year, he could no longer refuse. The meeting, according to the President, is likely to occur at the end of August. Aliyev noted that there would be no energy cooperation or joint political declaration. Aliyev also said that he would use the opportunity to encourage Iran to solve its conflict with the international community over its nuclear program. He agreed that it would be important to be transparent and keep the USG informed. He noted Ahmadinejad's visit to Armenia and energy cooperation with Armenia.

REQUEST FOR U.S. MILITARY TRAIN AND EQUIP PROGRAM

19. (C) Following-up on the July 9-10 U.S.-Azerbaijan Security Dialogue in Washington, the Ambassador reviewed with the President the conditions under which the USG would be willing to consider responding to the Azerbaijani request for a train and equip program, including explicitly tying the program to the deployment of trained forces to the NATO Mission in Afghanistan. Nodding his head and commenting that "we'll do it," the President confirmed his government's intention to increase its troop presence in Afghanistan and noted that this would be excellent training for these forces.

110. (C) The President then noted the explicit link between the program and the deployment of trained troops, saying that as there had been no explicit link in the case of Georgia, there should not be one for Azerbaijan. The Ambassador responded that a link had indeed been made in Georgia's train and equip programs and was essential for the USG to consider further exploration of this proposal with his government. The President then said that he agreed, in principle, to provide U.S. TEP-trained troops to Coalition operations in

BAKU 00000953 003 OF 003

Afghanistan and would immediately convey this to his Foreign Minister. How many troops and when they would be deployed remained to be decided, but he was willing to start as soon as possible. The Ambassador noted that EUCOM was prepared to send a technical team to Azerbaijan in August to explain how a train and equip program could work and answer questions. The President welcomed this visit.

Energy Issues: Iran-Turkey Agreement a Surprise

111. (C) Asked about the recent announcement of an Iran-Turkey gas deal, the President said it came as a surprise to him, adding that it had been prepared in total secrecy. Aliyev was aware of and welcomed the proposed \$1.7 million USTDA grant for a feasibility study of a trans-Caspian gas link between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. He added that he will be going to Kazakhstan on August 8 or 9 and suggested that if the USG has issues he should raise with the Kazakh President that he was willing to do so.

COMMENT

112. (C) As before, the President appeared genuinely exasperated about how to deal with the question of media freedom. Several times he expressed the view that no matter what he does, he is viewed as a dictator by the West. The specific issue of the pardoning of the seven journalists is one that has gained considerable attention in recent weeks in Baku. Aliyev seems to be searching for a face-saving device to allow him to pardon the journalists without being seen as

caving to international pressure. Post will quietly consult with the Press Council and others whether there is such a compromise solution possible. DRL A/S Lowenkron should also consider exploring possible compromise solutions during his DVC Human Rights and Democracy Dialogue with FM Mammadyarov on August 3.

¶13. (C) Comment Continued: Although he purports to be indifferent to international pressure, the President was obviously both sensitive to criticism and bitter, as always, with respect to what he views as the West's double standard vis-a-vis Azerbaijan's democratic development. Aliyev's attitude is a factor we need to contend with as we press for greater political reform here. We need to take advantage of the President's willingness to hear USG ideas about how to resolve the difficult press situation and lay the groundwork for a successful election by providing concrete suggestions.
DERSE